

**Remarks Following a Meeting With President Alvaro Uribe Velez of Colombia and an Exchange With Reporters**

*June 29, 2009*

*President Obama.* Well, I am very pleased to have President Uribe here today with his delegation from Colombia. The relationship between the United States and Colombia has been extremely strong. We've had great cooperation on a whole range of issues, and President Uribe's administration, I think, has, under very difficult circumstances, performed admirably on a whole range of fronts: on security, on reducing the influence of the drug cartels, in improving the economic situation for his people, and stabilizing the country. He has performed with diligence and courage. And so we are grateful for his friendship, and I'm glad that he was able to come and visit us here today.

In our discussions, we talked about a range of issues. We discussed, most prominently, the interests of both countries in moving forward on a free trade agreement. This is something that has been discussed for quite some time. I have instructed Ambassador Kirk, our United States Trade Representative, to begin working closely with President Uribe's team on how we can proceed on a free trade agreement. There are obvious difficulties involved in the process, and there remains work to do, but I'm confident that, ultimately, we can strike a deal that is good for the people of Colombia and good for the people of the United States.

I commended President Uribe on the progress that has been made in human rights in Colombia and dealing with the killings of labor leaders there, and obviously, we've seen a downward trajectory in the deaths of labor unions, and we've seen improvements when it comes to prosecution of those who are carrying out these blatant human rights offenses. President Uribe acknowledges that there remains more work to be done, and we look forward to cooperating with him to continue to improve both the rights of organized labor in Colombia and to protect both labor and civil rights leaders there.

Along those same lines, we, obviously, think that the steps that have already been made on issues like extrajudicial killings and illegal surveillance—that it is important that Colombia pursue a path of rule of law and transparency, and I know that that is something that President Uribe is committed to doing.

We spoke about the regional challenges. The drug trafficking that has been such a cancer in the life of Colombia affects the region as a whole. When I last met with President Calderon of Mexico, he indicated the extraordinary challenges that that country is facing. Mexico and Colombia are not alone in this. Throughout the region in Central and South America, we are seeing this problem. It's important that the United States steps up and cooperates effectively in battling the adverse effects of drug trafficking.

And that includes, by the way, the United States reducing demand for drugs. We have responsibilities. We have responsibilities to reduce the trafficking of guns into the south that help strengthen these cartels and the flows of money and money laundering that, at times, involves not just the south—Southern Hemisphere but also the Northern Hemisphere. And so looking for additional ways that we can cooperate on those issues is very important.

Finally, we spoke about the fact that our relationship is much broader than simply our common enemy in the drug traffickers. We want a proactive, positive agenda for human

development throughout the region and inside Colombia. And so exploring ways that we can advance clean energy cooperation, how we can advance efforts to improve child nutrition, reduce infant mortality, expand health care to ordinary people, that is part of what I think President Uribe's comprehensive vision is. That you don't just use military tools to defeat the enemies of progress, but you use a comprehensive approach that includes improvements in rule of law and improvements in people's day-to-day well-being and their opportunities for economic advancement as very powerful weapons to restore order and to ensure that people feel confident in the future.

And so we want to be a partner with Colombia on these issues. I'm grateful, again, for President Uribe's friendship, and I'm confident that we are going to be working diligently in the future to advance the interests of both countries. So thank you very much.

*President Uribe.* Thank you, Mr. President.

Q. President Obama, can we take a picture with you?

*President Obama.* Hold on one second. You know, I just realized there may be Spanish press here, and that was a long statement, but if you don't mind, I'm going to go ahead and have that translated just so your people can get it. I'm sorry, I should have slowed down; I forgot.

Q. President Obama, did you talk something about reelection?

*President Obama.* Hold on. Hold on one second.

[*At this point, President Obama's opening statement was translated into Spanish by an interpreter.*]

*President Uribe.* President Obama, I want to express our gratitude again to you, to your Cabinet, and to the United States. Colombia, in this alliance with the United States, has received a great help for us to confront the challenges our people have suffered for long, long time.

I have said to President Obama that Colombia, since the middle of the forties, in the last century, has not lived one single day in complete peace. The help of your Government is very important for the hope of the new generations of Colombians. Thank you, President Obama.

We have had opportunity to speak about many topics, as President Obama has said. I said to President Obama, I made to him some comments about confidence in Colombia; about security, the advances, the problems we still face; about investment, its relationship with the free trade agreement as a signal to give confidence in Colombia; and about social cohesion, the advances in education, in microlending, in health; the problems we still face, problems in poverty, in income distribution.

And in the case of human rights, Colombia is a rule of law in the utmost expression of public opinion participation. We—I am the first with a duty to support of our armed forces, but for that reason of their honor, every soldier, every policeman in Colombia understands that we need credibility for this policing of democratic security. And credibility depends on effectiveness and on transparency, and transparency is a question of human rights. Therefore, we are open, we are very receptive, to receive any advice, any suggestion on how we are going to fulfill our goal of ceasing civil violations of human rights in Colombia.

About surveillance, I have said to President Obama that during our administration, we have restructured 427 state agencies, and we are in the process to restructure the state agency

for surveillance. We hope to issue these decrees in the coming 3 weeks, and we hope that we can solve the endemic problems of these institutions—of this institution for good.

I have said to President Obama about the importance of the help of the United States for us and the region as a whole to advance in social cohesion; help directly from the United States or through the multilateral banks. For instance, in education and in child nutrition, we have advanced a lot, but we lack infrastructure; coverage has surpassed infrastructure. In child nutrition, we have advanced a lot, but we lack coverage in education for those under 6, not to mention other of our problems. But we have a recognition to advance in security, human rights, state restructure, to advance in economics, to advance in social cohesion. And for all these things, it is very important to have this permanent support of President Obama, of the Government of the United States, of the Congress of the United State.

My gratitude, again, President Obama, and we are waiting for you in Colombia.

*President Obama.* Thank you.

Q. President Obama——

Q. Did you talk about the reelection——

*President Obama.* Hold on, hold on. We're going to—we only have time for two questions. I'm going to call on a U.S. reporter, and then, President Uribe, you can make a decision on which one of the Colombian reporters you want to call on. [*Laughter*]

So, Doug Palmer of Reuters.

Q. [*Inaudible*]

*President Obama.* Doug. Hold on, please. Doug.

#### *Situation in Honduras/Colombia-U.S. Free Trade Agreement*

Q. Right here. Thank you very much. You talked about the FTA, and you also talked about some of the obstacles to getting the FTA through Congress. I wonder, do you have a sense of how close Colombia is to where it needs to be in order for you to send the agreement to Congress? Is that something that can be accomplished this year?

And then, I also wondered if you would comment on the coup in Honduras and what additional steps the U.S. might be considering there.

*President Obama.* Well, let me, first of all, speak about the coup in Honduras, because this was a topic of conversation between myself and President Uribe.

All of us have great concerns about what's taken place there. President Zelaya was democratically elected. He had not yet completed his term. We believe that the coup was not legal and that President Zelaya remains the President of Honduras, the democratically elected President there. In that, we have joined all the countries in the region, including Colombia and the Organization of American States.

I think it's—it would be a terrible precedent if we start moving backwards into the era in which we are seeing military coups as a means of political transition rather than democratic elections. The region has made enormous progress over the last 20 years in establishing democratic traditions in Central America and Latin America. We don't want to go back to a dark past. The United States has not always stood as it should with some of these fledgling democracies, but over the last several years, I think both Republicans and Democrats in the

United States have recognized that we always want to stand with democracy, even if the results don't always mean that the leaders of those countries are favorable towards the United States. And that is a tradition that we want to continue.

So we are very clear about the fact that President Zelaya is the democratically elected President, and we will work with the regional organizations like OAS and with other international institutions to see if we can resolve this in a peaceful way.

With respect to the free trade agreement, obviously, a lot of work has already been done on the free trade agreement, and we are hopeful that we can move forward to completion. I don't have a strict timetable, because I'm going to have to consult with Congress, obviously, on this issue. We've got a lot on our plates, if you haven't noticed. And I think that the burden is not simply on Colombia; I think Colombia has done a lot of excellent work. It is a matter of getting both countries to a place where their legislatures feel confident that it will be, ultimately, to the economic benefit of these countries.

I have noted a special concern that is bipartisan and shared both by this administration and Congress that the human rights issues in Colombia get resolved. President Uribe has assured me that he is interested in resolving those issues. And, as I said, great progress has been made. I trust that we can make more progress. And I think that will help shape the overall environment in which this issue is being debated in Congress.

Okay? You want to call on——

*Q. Presidente——*

*President Uribe. Entonces, Natalia Orozco.*

#### *Central America-U.S. Relations/South America-U.S. Relations*

*Q.* President Obama, President Chavez, it's not a secret, wanted to be reelected; President Zelaya wanted to be reelected; and President Uribe hasn't decided yet. Are you worried about what relation of those leader, and can have effects in the Western Hemisphere? Do you have a message for them?

*President Obama.* Well, first of all, I think it's very important that, in all these countries, it's not for the United States to make these decisions; it's for the people of these countries to make these decisions. And one of the clear policies that we want to put forward is that we stand on the side of democracy, sovereignty, and self-determination.

We know that our experience in the United States is that two terms works for us, and that after 8 years, usually the American people want a change. I related to President Uribe the fact that our most revered President, or at least one of our two most revered Presidents, George Washington, part of what made him so great was not just being the founder of our country, but also the fact that at a time when he could have stayed President for life, he made a decision that after service, he was able to step aside and return to civilian life. And that set a precedent then for the future.

But as I said, each country, I think, has to make these decisions on their own, and I think what's ultimately most important is that the people feel a sense of legitimacy and ownership, and that this is not something imposed on them from the top, that it's not—does not involve manipulations of the electorate or rigging of the electoral process or repression of opposition voices, but that whatever is determined is done in an open, transparent way so that people feel confident that whoever is in power represents their voices and their interests.

Q. [*Inaudible*]

President Uribe. No, let me——

Q. [*Inaudible*]

President Obama. She just wants a picture——

Q. [*Inaudible*]

President Uribe. No, but let me make some comments about this question. I brought to the table some topics that I call topics of internal debate in Colombia at this moment. And one of the topics I brought to talk about it with President Obama is this topic. And I want to summarize.

I said to President Obama, first, I am concerned, because I am a member of one generation of the four or five generations that have not lived one single day in peace in Colombia or prosperity. Therefore, I consider that Colombia needs to extend in that time security, democratic values, investment in social responsibility and social cohesion, with adjustments.

I don't believe in the stagnation, and I don't believe in gross changes. I believe in one goal, in one mission, with dynamism, with daily adjustments. And I have said in the second point of this comment that I consider that this is—[*inaudible*—it is necessary to extend these policies. It is not convenient to perpetuate the precedent.

And I have said to President Obama what I want to say to you. Colombia is a country of solid democratic institutions. When we speak about institutions, we cannot speak in abstract about institutions. We have to speak about institutions in concrete terms. We have 1,102 mayors directly elected by the people; 32 Governors. The regions in Colombia invest 51 percent of the public expenses. My Government has built governments with all the regional Governors and mayors regardless their political allegiance, and they have many, many political allegiance.

The justice administration is independent in Colombia. Colombia has solid free press. Colombia has bodies, independent bodies, for control. Colombia is a country with very solid institutions.

I beg you, journalists, to separate the convenience or inconvenience of perpetuating the precedent with the qualification of our institutions. Anyway, our democratic institutions are totally solid.

President Obama. Well—and the other thing I should say is that if I were to serve two terms, I'm fairly confident that I would not have the 70 percent approval rating that President Uribe has. [*Laughter*]

All right, thank you very much, everybody.

Note: The President spoke at 3:43 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. A reporter referred to President Hugo Chavez Frias of Venezuela.

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